The Three Keys

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We all have heard that people are the key to success, but how quickly we forget it! Instead, we put our effort into working on process, procedures, organizational changes and tools to improve the performance of our projects.

Why People Are Number One

The manifesto for agile software development (agilemanifesto.org) says: "Individuals and interactions over processes and tools." And moreover, this the first of four such comparisons that comprise the manifesto. Project managers who rely on fast iteration to make progress under turbulent conditions know from experience that nothing matters more than motivated, seasoned people.

Those of us who prefer to be convinced instead by hard data can look at the broad base of data collected by Barry Boehm for his COCOMO model (a model for calculating the time and effort needed to build a given piece of software). After surveying over a hundred projects, Boehm identified 22 factors that affect project time and effort. I have lumped these factors into seven categories. The most influential by far is the people category, which can affect time and effort over a range of 33 to one (for instance, the cost of a project can range from $100,000 to $3.3 million depending on the people working on it).

The next most influential category is the factors related to the product being developed, with a range of 10 to one. Third is tools and processes, which have a range of only three to one. Other categories--including schedule constraints, project priority and design reuse--rank lower. Accordingly, people have an impact about 10 times larger than processes and tools.

Seasoned People Count

When you are working in a constantly changing environment--which is the norm these days, but not the environment for which conventional project management approaches were designed--the experience level of your people becomes critical.

We traditionally measure experience in terms of years working in a certain area. But research involving projects under change reveals that what really matters is not years on the job but the number of projects on which a person has worked. Each project teaches an individual new ways of coping with change. In addition, a person exposed to many different projects in a short time also becomes more used to change--and thus less intimidated by it. Consequently, don't count years—instead, count a person's project repertory.

Unfortunately, seasoned people are scarce. Alistair Cockburn proposes a scheme for providing an acceptable balance by considering what he calls mastery levels. His three levels are following, detaching and fluent:

- **Following** distinguishes a person who lacks experience with improvisation and thus is only able to follow a prescribed procedure.
- **Detaching** characterizes a person who has been following but has been exposed to enough projects that the shortcomings of the prescribed procedures are becoming apparent. Such people can see that deviations from set methods are needed, but they are not equipped to design these deviations yet.
- **Fluent** people have coped with so many differing situations that they improvise on the spot and may not even recognize that they are improvising. Such people could become bored in a static situation and could even be dangerous in situations where conformance to procedure is paramount.

Cockburn goes on to explain that you do not need to have fluent types throughout, but you should pay careful attention to placing them in key roles and be sure that you are not overloaded with follower types of people if you anticipate change.

Keep in Touch

Once you have your people lined up, you need to find ways to keep in touch with their progress. The normal mode for a project manager is to sit in the cubical and watch the project evolve by using a tool such as Microsoft Project. This is like trying to drive by looking in the rear-view mirror--totally unacceptable for a fast-moving project. You need to anticipate what is going to happen, and you can do this only by spending your time out with those working on the project (looking over their shoulders, so to speak).

Clearly there is a danger in this, so you will need to learn some new skills. Those being observed may be uncomfortable with your observation, or they may not want to reveal anything until it is finished and fully tested. There is a careful balance between

observing and being nosey, between offering options and dictating, and between providing support and making assignments. Some managers are good at this, but most of us will need to watch how we are being perceived and make adjustments as we go. Corporate culture will either facilitate or hinder this more intimate style, too.

Nevertheless, the ability to obtain immediate, unfiltered feedback on progress is invaluable on a project subject to the winds of change--this is the style of an agile project manager.

Enhance Communication
Another key to success is to lower the barriers to team communication. The traditional way of doing this is to co-locate the team in a small area where the highest-fidelity type of communication can prevail: face-to-face. Unfortunately, this is becoming increasingly difficult to accomplish as teams grow in size, become global and depend more on electronic communication. It is especially unfortunate that upper management often does not recognize the barriers to effective team communication they are erecting as they acquire distant units, pursue offshore opportunities and blithely assume that installing videoconferencing or Web 2.0 tools will overcome the communication hurdles.

Consequently, if you are to become a successful project manager in the current era, you will have to make sure that your people can communicate effectively and are indeed doing so. There are several things you can do:

- Use as much of co-location as you can, for instance by co-locating the parts of your team residing in the same metropolitan area.
- Use a "war room" (the Japanese/lean term is *obeya*) to make as much of the project visible in one place as possible and to create a magnet that draws participants to this place.
- Pay special attention to common communication tools like e-mail. For instance, if you find that people aren't replying to e-mails quickly, have the team create for themselves a rule that any team e-mail will receive some kind of response in, say, four hours.

This article assumes, in gantthead style, that the project you are leading is subject to more than the usual amount of chaos. If it isn't, you can pick up a traditional project management book, read it on the beach as you relax and do just fine. However, if your project is more demanding than this, the people perspective covered here is likely to be your key to success.

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